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LINGUISTIC JOKES IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

Humour is an area which offers numerous possibilities to foreign language teachers. It can help students to relax, lowering their anxiety and the negative filter, and thus facilitating language acquisition¹. Humour may also be used to help students to understand English culture and explore the prejudices about English-speaking people. Finally, jokes may be used in teaching vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. The present paper is concerned with one specific area of humour, namely linguistic jokes, and its application in teaching English as a foreign language. First, an attempt is made to define linguistic jokes as a category, followed by illustrative examples of various types of jokes which can be used with students representing different levels of proficiency in English.

Following Ritchie², linguistic jokes will be defined here as the ones that “explicitly impose conditions on the linguistic form of the joke, in phonetic, orthographic, or syntactic terms”. They can be contrasted with propositional or referential jokes, in which the “amusing substance is in what the joke says – the events described, the characters, the situations – rather than the details of the language used”. In other words, linguistic jokes rely on their form, whereas in the propositional jokes the content (meaning) is more important. The fact that in linguistic jokes the form is so important makes them particularly useful in

¹ cf. S. D. Krashen, *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*, Prentice Hall International, 1987, and S. D. Krashen, *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*, Prentice Hall International, 1988.

² G. Ritchie, *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*, London and New York, 2004, p. 14.

teaching pronunciation, spelling and vocabulary. However, the application of linguistic jokes is not limited to teaching linguistic forms and structures; they may also be helpful in developing students' intercultural competence because of the socio-cultural aspects which often appear in the background. As Ritchie³ notices, [w]hat causes a text to be a joke will usually depend on the meaning(s) of that text, and it is the comprehension of these meanings that in turn require specific linguistic or factual knowledge... ”.

Verbal humour exists in different forms, such as puns, riddles, amusing epigrams or anecdotes, which are frequently combined in one joke. This paper will be concerned mainly with puns, as they seem to be very common in English and are the clearest type of linguistic jokes, and anecdotes. Puns involve the treatment of “homonyms as synonyms”⁴, and the deliberate confusion and ambiguity of forms is what makes them funny. They seem to be more common in analytic languages like English, and less easy to make in inflecting languages like Polish, where the need for gender and case inflection often makes a play on words more difficult. The pun seems to be a form particularly admired in Britain⁵, and as such it forms part of English culture which Poles learning English should familiarise themselves with. In fact, puns are not considered to be the funniest type of joke, but they may be stimulating to students, who have to use their intellect and language skills to discover the structure and meaning of such jokes.

There are different types of puns, the major ones being homographic puns, based on the orthographic sameness of words which have different meanings, e.g. bat (‘a kind of animal’, and ‘the stick for hitting the ball in cricket’), and homophonic puns, which make use of the difference in meanings between words which have the same pronunciation but different spelling, such as ‘fair’ and ‘fare’. There are also compound puns, which involve combinations of puns. Homographic puns may be used to make students aware of the existence of homonyms and homographs in English. Such puns can be used with students of various levels of proficiency in English, provided that they are chosen according to the students’ linguistic ability. For intermediate learners they will be sources of new vocabulary, and for advanced learners, such as students of English at teacher training colleges or universities, they may serve as devices facilitating memorization of major types of semantic relations between words in English, which they are taught during their courses in linguistics. The four homographic puns which follow have a simple grammatical structure and involve a play on one word each, therefore, they can be used with both intermediate and more advanced students:

³ G. Ritchie, *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*, London and New York, 2004, p. 38.

⁴ W. Redfern, *Puns*, London, 1984.

⁵ en.wikipedia.org

If flying is so safe, why do they call the airport the terminal?⁶

*What is grey, has four legs, and a trunk?
A mouse on vacation.⁷*

*At what time of life may a man be said to belong to the vegetable kingdom?
When long experience has made him sage.⁸*

What's the difference between a canoe and a Canadian? Sometimes the canoe tips.⁹

In the first one, *terminal* is ambiguous between 'a place for the use of passengers joining or leaving for example a bus' and an adjective referring to an illness that brings death. In the second one, the word *trunk* may suggest an elephant, but the joke points to the other meaning it may have, i.e., that of 'a bag'. The third one plays on the ambiguity of the word 'sage': 'a wise person', and 'a kind of a plant'. Finally, the last one makes use of the homonymic nature of *tip*, which, among other things, may mean 'to give additional money for a service performed' or 'to fall over unintentionally'.

Homophonic puns may be used to help students remember the pronunciation of problematic or easily confused words. For example:

*What did one sheep say to the other?
I love ewe.¹⁰*

The word 'ewe' in the answer is homophonous with 'you', which is a much more common word, and may serve as a hint in remembering the pronunciation of the often mispronounced by Poles 'ewe'. In the joke that follows the play on words involves the adjective 'naval', which is homophonous with the noun 'navel':

*My brother is a naval surgeon.
Wow, they do specialize nowadays, don't they?¹¹*

⁶ www.gpsa.co.za/jokes

⁷ G. Ritchie, *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*, London and New York, 2004, joke (28)

⁸ J. R. Colombo, *Colombo's Little Book of Canadian Proverbs, Graffiti, Limericks and Other Vital Matters*. Edmonton, 1975, p. 12.

⁹ B. Casselman, *Canadian Sayings 3*, Toronto, 2004, p. 122.

¹⁰ G. Ritchie, *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*, London and New York, 2004, joke (14).

¹¹ G. Ritchie, *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*, London and New York, 2004, joke (2).

In some cases, puns are less straightforward and may be more difficult for students to understand, for example:

Why did the cookie cry?

Because its mother had been a wafer so long¹²

Here, the pun involves the similarity in pronunciation between the word 'wafer' and the phrase 'away for', which may be difficult to grasp for intermediate students, who in addition may not be sure about the meaning of 'wafer', but more advanced students should have no problems with this pun. The difficulty of understanding puns is not necessarily a drawback since the effort students have to put in deciphering the pun brings satisfaction. The pun below is also slightly above the intermediate level because it represents the compound type and involves several puns:

Why did the antelope?

Nobody gnu.¹³

This pun works most effectively in American English, where the words 'ant' and 'aunt', as well as 'gnu' and 'knew' have the same pronunciation. Polish students, many of whom are exposed mainly to British English, may not realize that for Americans the pun involves the deliberate ambiguity between 'Why did the aunt elope?' and 'Why did the antelope?'. This pun may serve as an illustration of some of the differences between British and American English. The first sentence of this pun may seem ungrammatical, but, as Ritchie points out, it becomes grammatical in the context of, for example: "Why did the gazelle die? Why did the antelope?". This may be also pointed out to students, who will practise the structure of sentences at the same time. Compound puns may thus be used to focus students' attention on numerous aspects of English.

Apart from pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax, verbal jokes may be used to demonstrate to students the importance of punctuation in English, which is often a neglected area in teaching. The following joke could be used with intermediate students, as the vocabulary and structures used here are relatively simple, as well as advanced students, who still often have problems with English punctuation:

¹² G. Ritchie, *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*, London and New York, 2004, joke (29).

¹³ G. Ritchie, *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*, London and New York, 2004, joke (19).

An English teacher wrote these words on the whiteboard: "woman without her man is nothing". The teacher then asked the students to punctuate the words correctly.

The men wrote: "Woman, without her man, is nothing."

The women wrote: "Woman! Without her, man is nothing."¹⁴

Linguistic jokes may also be used to draw students' attention to the need for precision when speaking or, even more importantly, writing in English. The two which follow make use of the ambiguity of the prepositional phrases used in the sentences:

A lady went into a clothing store and asked 'May I try on that dress in the window?' – 'Well', replied the sales clerk doubtfully, 'don't you think it would be better to use the dressing room?'"¹⁵

Postman: Here's your five-cent stamp.

Shopper (With arms full of bundles): Do I have to stick it on myself?

Postmaster: Nope, On the envelope.¹⁶

Probably the widest application of linguistic jokes is possible with students of English departments at universities or teacher training colleges, who take courses in English history and culture, varieties of English, and linguistics. Perhaps the most obvious advantage of linguistic jokes is that they may be used to teach linguistics. As already mentioned, puns illustrate the existence of homographs, homophones and homonyms in English, and thus, they may be used to help students to understand the major types of semantic relations in English. They may also be used to introduce some linguistic terminology. In fact, students may be encouraged to make linguistic jokes themselves. The following joke is taken from the website of the Department of Linguistics at the University of Toronto, and has been made by students of linguistics:

What do you call it when someone calls Chomsky a conservative?

A mis-noam-er!¹⁷

¹⁴ <http://www.anglik.net/britishjokes.htm>

¹⁵ G. Ritchie, *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*, London and New York, 2004, joke (25).

¹⁶ G. Ritchie, *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*, London and New York, 2004, joke (26).

¹⁷ www.chass.toronto.ca/~slugs/index.php?S=humor

Most students of English are familiar with the name Noam Chomsky, whose research helped to develop numerous linguistic theories and methodological concepts that they have studied at university or college. Some of them will also know that Chomsky has become engaged in politics and can hardly be called a conservative in any of the fields that he has worked in. Thus, the pun involving his first name and the word 'misnomer' may be used to teach students that 'a misnomer is the wrong name or term for something; a misleading name'¹⁸.

Linguistic jokes may be also used to introduce students to some differences between English accents and dialects, which are sometimes sources of misunderstandings and anecdotes. Some of the most common jokes of this type illustrate the characteristic Australian/Cockney pronunciation of the diphthong [eɪ], which is realized as [aɪ] in the two varieties, for example:

*During the war, a British General visited an Australian Army Hospital. Sensing a doom and gloom atmosphere he tried to rally the men by asking 'Now you men didn't come here to die, did you?' to which an Aussie replied: 'No, sir, we came here yesterdie'*¹⁹

Or:

Sydney Airport. A group of American tourists is waiting for the check-in when an Aussie official comes up to them asking:

'How many miles to Hong Kong?' –

Utter bewilderment on the American side, until a member of the group timidly (!) talks back: 'How are we supposed to know??' – 'How many FEE-MILES then?'

The first joke involves the similarity of the Australian pronunciation of 'die' with the English of 'day', whereas in the other one 'males' is interpreted as 'miles', and 'females' as 'fee miles'.

There are also numerous anecdotes which exploit the differences between accents. Anecdotes usually begin as real stories that develop into jokes. Görlach²⁰ quotes a misprint in a South African daily in the early 1990s (a phoned-in text), which resulted from a misunderstanding between a white and a black speaker: 'House for sale. Four bedrooms, two garages, swimming-pool, [...] seven squatters.' The last word was a misinterpretation of the intended 'servants' quarters'. Another anecdote told by Görlach exploits the peculiarities of Indian English visible in the confusion of the words 'lawyer' and 'liar':

¹⁸ en.wikipedia.org

¹⁹ <http://internet-café.org/cybernet>

²⁰ M. Görlach, *Even More Englishes. Studies 1996–1997*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1998, p. 52.

*An Indian gentleman was going to take his neighbour to court and was uncertain about whom to ask for legal assistance. "You must ask Dr Soandso," was the advice. "He is the greatest liar in Bangalore."*²¹

The greatest dialectal differences are noticeable in the area of the British Isles. Trudgill²² tells a joke which illustrates a characteristic feature of the so called 'Geordie' (Tyneside) accent, where words such as 'work' are pronounced with the 'aw' sound, whereas words such as 'walk' have [a:]. This is the reason for the misunderstanding in the following joke:

A non-Geordie doctor asks his patient if he is able to walk, which his patient interprets as a query about work and replies: "Wawk! I cannot even wawk yet!"

Verbal jokes may also be used to introduce students to or test their knowledge of the history or culture of English-speaking countries, for example, the joke below makes reference to Australia's beginnings as a penal colony. It is not strictly speaking a linguistic joke, but the understanding of this joke depends on familiarity with expressions such as 'penal record', and, as such, it draws attention to the language used here:

As I was entering Sydney international airport the other day, the Immigration Officer stopped me. "Do you have a penal record?", He asked – "I didn't know you still needed one" – I quipped.

Jokes are often a reflection of stereotypes, such as the ones about Canadian (supposedly exaggerated) politeness and tolerance below:

Q: *What does a Canadian say when you step on his foot?*

A: "Sorry"

Q: *How many Canadians does it take to change a light bulb?*

A: *None. Canadians don't change light bulbs, we accept them as they are.*²³

Students of English, frequently being future teachers or translators, may find jokes about these professions to be amusing and didactic at the same time. Such jokes may be a starting point for a discussion followed by vocabulary work, such as the following joke about an English professor and a parrot:

²¹ M. Görlach, *Even More Englishes. Studies 1996–1997*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1998, p. 53.

²² P. Trudgill, *The Dialects of England* (2nd edition) Oxford, 2000, p. 70.

²³ www.discourse.net/archives/2004/11/canadian_jokes_anyone.html

*An English Professor complained to the pet proprietor, "The parrot I purchased uses improper language", "I'm surprised", said the owner, "I've never known that bird to swear." "Oh,, it isn't that", explained the Professor, "But yesterday I heard him split the infinitive"*²⁴

This joke makes reference to the common prescriptive statement that the split infinitive, i.e., expressions such as 'to immediately follow' rather than 'to follow immediately', are incorrect in English. They are in fact used quite frequently by native speakers, but some language purists, such as the English professor in the joke above, consider them to be linguistic 'crimes'.

There are also jokes which illustrate differences between English teachers and, for example, science teachers, such as the one below about an English teacher substituting for a maths teacher.

A high-school English teacher had to fill in for a math teacher on short notice. He was a little nervous, as he'd never taught anything other than English before. He decided to keep it simple.

"I don't know what your teacher had planned," he told the class, "so we're just going to review some basic multiplication."

He went to the blackboard and wrote "5 x 2". He turned to the students, and instantly a bunch of hands went up. He chose one girl, who confidently said "10".

"Good. Let's try one that's a little harder now," said the teacher. And he wrote "3 x 4 x 5" on the board. This time not as many hands went up. He called on a boy, who answered "60".

"Correct," said the teacher, feeling like things were going pretty smoothly. "Now let's see if you guys can get this one." And he wrote "100 x 100" on the board. This time no hands went up. "Anybody?" the teacher prompted. Finally, one kid put her hand up in a tentative manner. The teacher called on her.

"Uh ... 1000?" she ventured.

The English teacher hesitated for a moment. Finally, he spoke.

*"1000. Okay, that's one answer ... anyone else?"*²⁵

The interpreter joke below illustrates the 'tricks of the trade' as well as cultural stereotypes concerning the exaggerated politeness and obedience of Japanese people:

²⁴ www.harryc.com/jokes16-teacher.htm

²⁵ <http://home.epix.net/~hce/english.html>

A famous writer who was visiting Japan was invited to have a lecture at a university to a large group of students. As most of them could not understand spoken English, he had to have an interpreter. During his lecture he told an amusing story which went on for rather a long time. At last he stopped to allow the interpreter to translate it into Japanese, and was very surprised when the man did this in a few seconds, after which all the students laughed loudly. After the lecture, the writer thanked the interpreter for his good work and then said to him, "Now please tell me how you translated that long story of mine into such a short Japanese one." "I didn't tell the story at all," the interpreter answered with a smile. "I just said, "The honourable lecturer has just told a funny story. You will all laugh, please."'²⁶

Verbal humour may be of great assistance to the English teacher, however, it needs to be pointed out that teacher roles should vary within a class²⁷, and teachers should not overuse humour in the classroom so as not to undermine their role as managers and controllers of the class. Naturally, teaching with the help of jokes is not systematic, so they should be used mainly to break the monotony of every-day teaching practice to draw students' attention to specific aspects of language. Another limitation on the use of verbal humour in the classroom is that not all teachers like telling jokes or being funny. Some teachers enjoy using humour during their lessons²⁸, others disapprove of it and fear that telling jokes will diminish their students' respect for them²⁹. However, linguistic jokes, puns in particular, seem to be fairly 'safe', since they may be presented as language games, in which students have to discover the linguistic ambiguity involved in a joke.

In conclusion, linguistic jokes may be used to develop linguistic as well as extralinguistic competences of students of English. Puns may serve as memorisation techniques for learning difficult and confusing words, and as means to illustrate syntactic ambiguities. Moreover, puns and anecdotes introduce students to numerous elements of English history, culture and the linguistic variety of the English language. The intellectual effort students put into understanding a joke as well as the relaxed atmosphere that jokes bring into the classroom may be helpful in raising the students' motivation to learn English. There are numerous Internet collections of different types of verbal jokes as well as books, from which teachers can choose the jokes that are best suited to their and their students' needs.

²⁶ efl.htmlplanet.com/humor_linguistic.htm

²⁷ cf. J. Harmer, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Harlow, 2001.

²⁸ M. Dudzikowa, *O pożytkach z poczucia humoru (nauczyciela) płynących...*, „Twórcza Szkoła” 2005, nr 8.

²⁹ H. Diduszko, *Humor w szkole?*, „Twórcza Szkoła”, 2005, nr 8.

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